

Lesson Three:
“I Think I Can” Works

Peak #1: Mount Tecumseh, June 7, 2008

The first day of June arrives, and the Internet forums are flooded with descriptions of snow-free mountains. Alex and I are eager to reattempt Mount Tecumseh. Sage says she also wants to try again, but I strongly suspect her enthusiasm is counterfeit. While Alex is genuinely interested, Sage is eager to please. The difference between the two types of motivation is huge and easy to mark. In spite of my doubts about Sage, I allow her to participate in picking the date of what we jokingly refer to as “Tecumseh, Take Two.” Both girls want to go as soon as possible, so we choose the upcoming Saturday, June 7. Later that evening, after the girls are tucked into bed and safely out of earshot, I ask my husband, Hugh, to accompany us on this hike so that Sage won’t feel any pressure to continue should she tire. If she decides at any point that she’s had enough, then Hugh can take her back down the mountain while Alex and I ascend. He agrees, and I go to bed relieved. I don’t want Sage put in a position where she feels pressured to keep going when her body is too tired to continue. I also don’t want to have to turn back if all is going well for Alex. Each child should be given the opportunity to hike as much or as little as she can.

The four of us arrive at the ski parking lot bright and early on June 7, just half an hour after finishing breakfast. This time around, I carry a much larger pack filled with wicking layers, fleece, raingear, plenty of food, water, a water filtering system, a first aid kit, a map, a compass, headlamps, sunblock, bug spray, the bivy shelter and foam sleeping mat, and a Swiss Army knife. We are clad in shorts and short-sleeve shirts made from synthetic fibers, and our feet are protected with waterproof hiking boots. The morning air is warm, but not muggy, and the bugs are not yet out. Our spirits high, we step off the road and into the woods.

The water crossing by the trailhead is just a trickle of water today, nothing like the ankle-

deep stream we encountered a couple of months ago. We step over it easily, not even wetting the soles of our boots. Up the small hill and alongside the brook we amble, admiring the sounds of the splashing water and commenting on the merits of dry, dirt trail. Our hike is so much simpler without all the snow. There's no slipping or sliding, no sinking, no snow-filled boots.

We cross another brook, this one wider and deeper than the one at the beginning of the trail. Alex hops from rock to rock with a giant grin on her face. Sage slowly steps across, looking nervous but determined.

There's another hill to tackle, this one longer and steeper. It must have been here a couple of months ago, but everything looks completely different without all the snow, and I don't remember this part of the trail. Luckily, many of the trees along the trail are "blazed," marked with a yellow rectangle at adult eye level, so at no time do we feel unsure of which way to go.

Alex climbs up with her head held high and her eyes taking in every bit of the wooded landscape. Sage putters along in a shuffling fashion, so I take her hand and sing silly songs to lighten her mood. She responds by smiling, but her brow is wrinkled and she doesn't look happy. We're only a half mile into the hike, but I've no doubt my three-year-old will not make it to the top unassisted. This doesn't bother me, for I never expected her to climb something of this magnitude; she is, after all, only three years old. I give silent thanks for Hugh's willingness to join us today; his assistance will most likely be needed.

The trail flattens out, and Sage's mood slightly improves. Alex continues to act as though we're just taking a casual stroll down our Somerville street.

A few minutes later, we reach our previous point of return. The trail now turns steeply downward and crosses fast-moving Tecumseh Brook. Luckily, there are large boulders on which to step, and the brook at this point is narrow. We cross without difficulty, then stop to rest by the

loud, splashing water. I hand each girl a bottle of juice and some trail mix. Alex looks good. She doesn't seem tired, and she hasn't yet uttered one word of complaint. Sage, however, shows signs of extreme fatigue, and her countenance is less than cheerful. According to our guidebook, we have hiked 1.1 miles. There's still more than a mile to go before we reach the summit. Then, of course, we'll have to hike all the way back down.

Ten minutes of drinking and eating later, we resume our hike and begin climbing steeply away from the brook. Halfway up this bit of trail, Sage throws in the towel and asks to be carried. Hugh promptly complies. Alex continues to hike strongly, asking only for a drink every now and then.

Fifteen minutes and much huffing and puffing later, we reach a viewpoint where a very short side path diverges and leads to a ski slope. Hugh needs to sit down for a while; he's in pain and isn't sure he can carry Sage much longer. Hugh is a rock climber, a runner, and a hiker, but his legs are artificial. Every once in a while, and in no predictable fashion, his stumps chafe painfully against his prosthetic sockets, and walking becomes an agonizing chore. Though he had started the hike in good form, his stumps are now causing him much grief. I offer to give him the backpack so I can take Sage, but he explains that the trade won't make much of a difference. I ask if he wants to turn back, but he tells me no, not yet.